Railroads In 1870

The increase of railroad mileage in Iowa was as phenomenal as the growth in population. This increase during the decade of the 1870's can be attributed to several factors. First of all, five of the ten railroads that linked the Mississippi with the Atlantic, before the Civil War, did so opposite Iowa—at Burlington, Davenport, Clinton, Dubuque, and McGregor. Secondly, the prime target for railroads after the Civil War was the coveted junction with the Union Pacific at Council Bluffs. The North Western won this race in 1867. The Burlington and Rock Island made their entrance into Council Bluffs in 1869, the very same year the Golden Spike was driven at Promontory Point in Utah.

By 1870 the million people already living in Iowa had many advantages not available to those pioneers who settled in the Black Hawk Purchase in Territorial days. Prior to 1846 Iowans dwelling on the Frontiers of 1830 and 1840 depended primarily on the steamboat for communication with the outside world. Towns were located along the Mississippi, principally in the Black Hawk Purchase. Prior to 1870 the pioneers on the Missouri slope not only had steamboat communica-

tion with the East, but they also had telegraphic communication with the Eastern seaboard. Thus, on April 2, 1865, the *Council Bluffs Bugle* [weekly] carried the news of Lincoln's assassination, five days after it happened! They also had three railroads—the North Western, Rock Island, and Burlington—all affording connections with the Union Pacific at Council Bluffs. From that town, or any town, Iowans could reach the Atlantic or the Pacific in a few days, rather than a few weeks, or even months.

Virtually every community in Iowa had stagecoach connections with railroads in 1870. This was not only true in Western Iowa, but it was still true in Eastern Iowa where most completed railroad tracks had been laid from the Mississippi to the Missouri. While railroad construction continued at a rapid pace until 1900, it was not until 1920 that the peak mileage in track was reached and the descent downward began.

On February 12, 1868, the Clinton *Iowa Age* gave a fairly accurate analysis of railroad construction in Iowa:

> The excitement about new lines of railroad in this state is at the very highest pitch. Not a county in the state but has in contemplation a railroad scheme. In some counties there are projects enough to require all the personal and real property of the county, to carry through.
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> Last winter the legislature passed a law allowing townships and municipalities to levy a tax of five per cent, upon the total valuation of the assessed property, to aid in the

construction of any railroad which might be projected through or into such a township or city. Every township thinks it ought to have a railroad, and we believe every township in every county is talking up railroad.

But Iowa never did build many railroads, and it will be many years before the capital of Iowa will be used for this purpose. Railroads will be built in the future as they have been in the past, but main lines will be constructed by outside capital, and the thousand projects for short branches will fall through.

Iowa is young, and the money of Iowa is invested in lands, farm houses and farm machinery. Not until the state becomes rich with manufactures, will the people of Iowa see their way clear to build railroads.

But most Iowa communities were impatient to have a railroad—not only for the economic advantages that would accrue, but also for the prestige it would bring the community. On July 1, 1870, the editor of the *Hampton Free Press* recalled the "troubles and vicissitudes" the town had gone through over a period of three years while awaiting the arrival of the Iron Horse. He praised the honesty of the President of the Central of Iowa who had not bled Hampton, even though he could have done "what every railroad does"—"either kill a town or suck it dry like an orange." We must remember, too, that this Railroad will not make us, only give us a chance to make ourselves."

More than one Iowa town could demonstrate the value of a railroad to the community. The

Davenport Democrat of January 6, 1870, was impressed with the following item it gleaned from the *Grand Junction Head-Light:*

BEAT THIS WHO CAN.—On the 14th of September last the first car load of lumber that was used in the construction of buildings in Grand Junction, was unloaded here by the C. & N. W. R. R. That lumber was used in the Babbitt Hotel, now a popular resort for all travel. Outside of this hotel, over *sixty* buildings have been erected, most of them being one and a half and two stories high, and costing from $800 to $1,800, and all comfortably as well as substantially built.—During the same length of time—three months and a half—an $18,000 depot and a $12,000 Round House with other railroad improvements have been completed, necessitating an outlay of capital amounting in the aggregate to not less than $100,000. Now if there is any other new or old town in the United States that can show up a better footing for improvements made in so short a time, we'd be pleased to hear from it.

There were negative as well as positive factors that accompanied the arrival of the Iron Horse. In a day when the word "Pollution" is on everyone's lips, it is interesting to note that one editor felt his readers were fortunate that the smoke from the Iron Horse did not pollute their town. Furthermore, there were wrecks and scores of accidents, many of them fatal. Nor were these accidents limited to human beings. The *Missouri Valley Harrisonian* of July 1, 1870, records:

A FLYING LEAP.—A few days since the engine on the C. & N. W. R. R., in passing through the yard in

this place, struck a cow, throwing her up as high as the smoke stack, and causing her to light upon her head about fifteen feet from the track. The old lady marched home that evening looking rather sad—mentally cussing railroads in general, and the Northwestern in particular.

The decade of the 1870's saw railroad mileage double from 2,683 in 1870 to 5,235 in 1880. While a few lines were still building westward, over half of this gain went to north-south construction, or to stub connecting lines of the major railroads crossing Iowa. Focal points in this construction were St. Louis, Kansas City, and St. Paul. At the close of the decade Iowa had passed the halfway mark in the total construction of track destined to be laid in the Hawkeye State.

Each year the statistics on railroad construction were published, and each year Americans marveled at the rate of construction in Iowa. The leading states in railroad mileage in 1870 and 1880 follows:

	1870		1880	
	Miles	Rank	Miles	Rank
Illinois	4,823	1	7,955	1
Pennsylvania	4,656	2	6,243	2
New York	3,928	3	6,019	3
Ohio	3,538	4	5,912	4
Indiana	3,177	5	4,454	6
Iowa	2,683	6	5,235	5
Missouri	2,000	7	4,011	7

One did not undergo such phenomenal railroad expansion without expense to the taxpayer. A

quick glance at the Franklin County Treasurer's Balance Sheet showed checks had been paid out for State Tax, Relief Fund, Orphans Tax, Insane Hospital Tax, Federal Tax, County Fund, Special County Fund, School Tax, and County and Township Road taxes, to mention a few.

Just as increased Iowa school taxes were meeting determined resistance in 1969-1970, so efforts to gain financial support for railroads were meeting strong opposition a century ago. On January 15, 1869, or four years before the Panic of 1873, the Clinton *Iowa Age* recorded:

TAX DEFEATED.—Our Maquoketa neighbors for the second time have voted against being taxed for the purpose of building a railroad. Another trial will be made on the 20th instant, but since a South Fork township, which is as much interested as Maquoketa, has voted against the tax, it is more than likely that Maquoketa will again do the same thing. This building railroads by taking people's property, is a new thing in Iowa, and we should rather conclude it was quite unpopular. The very men who vote against such a tax, in all probability are willing to subscribe for the railroad project, even more than their tax would be—but they don't like the principal of somebody else dictating what they should do. The Jackson County *Sentinel,* speaking of the defeat of the vote, says:

There is no use in attempting to disguise the fact that the result of this election has placed the road in a desperately precarious condition, but to set down now, folding their hands bewailing that which cannot now be helped or remedied, would be so unworthy the men who have made such a gallant fight for the best interests of the city

and country, that we do not entertain the thought for a moment. No time must be lost, but some prompt and decided action must be taken by the Board of Directors at the next meeting. What that action may be, of course we shall not presume to dictate to the Board, but it must be something that will instill more confidence into the great mass of the people for the ultimate success of the project.

It was Benjamin Franklin who said: "In this world nothing is certain but death and taxes." This was certainly true a century ago, as Iowans faced the rugged job of acquiring, developing, and meeting principal and interest payments on their farms. Furthermore, taxes on real and personal property, on individual incomes, and on internal improvements such as railroads, and a vast number of other hidden taxes, added to the average Iowan's burden. The *Weekly Davenport Democrat* of May 28, 1870, was in full accord with the following statement of an Illinois Congressman who, the editor felt, deserved "well-merited commendation" for his "ability to here reproduce his picture of the tariff, thus:"

> The farmer starting to his work has a shoe put on his horse with nails taxed 67 per cent., driven by a hammer taxed 54 per cent.; cuts a stick with a knife taxed 50 per cent; hitches his horse to a plow taxed 50 per cent., with chains taxed 67 per cent. He returns to his home at night and lays his wearied limbs on a sheet taxed 58 per cent., and covers himself with a blanket that has paid 250 per cent. He rises in the morning, puts on his humble flannel

shirt taxed 80 per cent., his coat taxed 50 per cent., shoes taxed 35 per cent., and hat taxed 70 per cent.; opens family worship by a chapter from his Bible taxed 25 per cent., and kneels to his God on an humble carpet taxed 150 per cent. He sits down to his humble meal from a plate taxed 40 per cent., with knife and fork 35 per cent.; drinks his cup of coffee taxed 47 per cent, or tea 78 per cent., with sugar 70 per cent.; seasons his food with salt taxed 100 per cent., pepper 297 per cent., or spice 379 per cent. He looks around upon his wife and children, all taxed in the same way; takes a chew of tobacco taxed 100 per cent., or lights a cigar taxed 120 per cent., and then thanks his stars that he lives in the freest and best government under heaven. If on the Fourth of July he wants to have the star spangled banner on real bunting he must pay the American Bunting Company of Massachusetts 100 per cent. for this glorious privilege. No wonder, sir, that the Western farmer is struggling with poverty, and conscious of a wrong somewhere, although he knows not whence the blow comes that is chaining him to a life of endless toil and reducing his wife and children to beggary.

Such opposition, although almost universal, may have slowed up, but did not stop the laying of railroad track in Iowa. But high railroad tariffs and exorbitant prices for manufactured products were targets for editorials and Anti-Monopoly meetings throughout the 1870's.

These protests, and continued articulate objections to the disparity created between industry and agriculture by the Tariff, had its repercussions in the agricultural unrest so characteristic

of the period 1870-1900. The Patrons of Husbandry, or Granger Movement, had its beginnings in 1869. The Greenback Movement and the Populist Party, both of which were headed by James B. Weaver, an Iowan and a presidential candidate in 1880 and 1892, were outgrowths of the unrest that brought political campaigning to the boiling point every four years. The crusade reached a thrilling climax when William Jennings Bryan delivered his famous "Cross of Gold Speech" before the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1896. Since the close of World War II there has been a steadily mounting agricultural unrest that will doubtless continue as Iowans enter the 1970's.

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